The Palm Kernel "Differential Duty."

Reprint from THE SPECTATOR. [December 6, 1919.

TOPICS OF THE DAY.

THE EXPLOITATION OF EMPIRE.

PARLIAMENT, as the supreme guardian and trustee of the native races included in the British Empire, must without delay decide the question whether the policy adopted in West Africa in regard to the exportation of palm-kernels can be maintained, or will have to be abandoned or revised as involving the exploitation of the natives in the interests of British traders. Whether, as the Anti-Slavery Society alleges, what is being done in West Africa is a case of "exploitation," or whether it can be shown that the interests of the natives are not in fact made to suffer in order to promote British trade, we cannot say, for we have not the full facts before us. What we do say is that the principle involved is one of supreme importance, and therefore the sooner it is discussed in Parliament, and the great principle upon which our Empire is founded and maintained—"Government in the interests of the governed"—is redeclared, the better for the Imperial cause. In saying this we speak as firm and convinced Imperialists. We desire nothing more strongly than the continuance of the British Empire in "health and wealth long to live." By this we do not mean that we are indifferent to the rights and interests of the native races for which we are trustees. On the contrary, we are concerned for those rights and interests in themselves and apart from other considerations. We hold, however, that for the safety and welfare of the world the continuance of the British Empire is a matter of supreme importance. We hold also, as proved beyond all doubt, that the secret of our Empire's success is, as we have just stated, the maintenance of the principle of "*Government in the interests of the governed.*" It is because we have observed that principle that our Empire has not faded away, sterile at the roots and withered at the head. Remember that till we adopted that principle our Indian Empire had not true power or stability. When Cornwallis finally inculcated the principle, and what was essential to its assertion, the separation of trading from government, but not till then, the Indian Empire became invincible. What was memorable, though by no means strange or miraculous, was that trade flourished more when the Indian Government ceased to seek a profit in commerce and threw its frontiers open to the world. The world saw with amazement a trading company abandoning trade because it had taken on a trusteeship—the trusteeship of government—and found that sacred office incompatible with commercial exploitation.

At no time in our history did the Empire flourish, externally develop, and internally solidify so greatly as during the reign of Queen Victoria. But it was during that reign that the principle of Imperial trusteeship was finally and consciously accepted. Holding this principle as firmly as we believe the British people hold it, we are certain that they will not go back from it even if it can be shown that great pecuniary advantage can be acquired by the legislation which it is alleged—remember, we must not judge the facts till they have been properly laid before Parliament and discussed therein—makes West Africa in the matter of palm-kernels a "tied house" of the United Kingdom. If it is the case that the manipulation of the trade was necessary during the war, as we frankly admit it may have been, now that the war is over such a system must be abandoned without delay. If it can be shown that it is expedient to afford support to an infant industry so important as the production of vegetable oils for food and other purposes, then whatever subsidy is requisite for that industry must be provided here and not through the taxation of the natives of West Africa. This deduction from the prime principle of the Empire holds good even if the benefits conferred are as wide as the Empire and do not merely affect traders in these islands. Neither in the part nor in the whole can the principle of trusteeship be infringed. The touchstone which must be applied is the question: "*By doing this are we acting in the best interests of the governed, or are we not?*" And here let us say that we must be careful not to be misled by the plea that parts of the Empire must be willing to make sacrifices for the good of the whole. The principle of sacrifice is always a sound one, but it can never be satisfactorily applied except voluntarily. It is, if you will, one of the inconveniences of Empire, using the term in the sense of the government of primitive races, that such sacrifices cannot be made. A man may make them for himself, but he cannot make them for persons to whom he is in the relation of trustee, unless of course it can be shown that the failure to make such a sacrifice would involve the ruin of the people asked to make it. When the motive is not self-preservation but benefit to persons other than the natives themselves, it cannot be pressed. From this it follows that here we must not even invoke the maxim *de minimis*. On the contrary, we must give no one a handle to say in the future that we have ever stooped to exploitation. If we do, we may find that we have done the vase an injury which, though it seems at first very minute, may end in the destruction of the whole fabric.

In protesting as we do against the exploitation of the natives, and insisting upon the carrying out fearlessly and to the end of the great Imperial principle of "Government in the interests of the governed," we must remember that the observance of this maxim in no way sterilizes Imperial commerce, nor prevents the legitimate development of our trade in our African or other Crown Colonies. Though we must not forbid natives in places like West Africa to get the best prices they can for their labour or for the fruits of their labour, we have a perfect right to develop and make use of the great natural resources of their country which they are incapable of developing for themselves. If we have no right to exploit them, they certainly have no right to paralyse that which can be, and ought to be, used in the general service of mankind. For example, we should never admit the right of any native tribe to forbid a railway going through their territory because for some reason they disliked it, if that railway enabled minerals or other products of some inland region to be brought to the coast. Again, if in some British Colony there was great wealth of timber which could be only made use of by means of European enterprise and organization, to hesitate to use such natural wealth to the greatest advantage on a punctilio that the development was not desired by the natives would, in our opinion, be absurd. Between that and the legislation which deprives a man of the right to make the best advantage of the products of his labour there is a world-wide difference. Take an anomalous case. It is our business to see that nothing in the form of slavery or forced labour is allowed to exist under the British flag. But while we must enslave no native race, we need not, and ought not to, listen to any plea that such native races may forbid other men to work.

In truth, the principle by which the export tax on palm-kernels sent to foreign lands must be judged is very simple. If by the existing enactments we are depriving the native growers and traders of the right to get the best price they can for their product, then we are failing in our duty of trusteeship. It is in the last resort a question of motive. By all means let us make the very best we can out of the hidden wealth of the Empire by active development, but let us never build our own prosperity through sacrifices enforced upon the natives within our charge. By that sin fell the great Empires of the past—the Empires of Rome, of Spain, of Portugal, and to a large extent of Holland. They allowed the two great evils of slavery and monopoly to dominate their policy, and it ruined them. We began by following in their footsteps, and to the ablest brains of a hundred and fifty years ago it looked as if we should share the same fate. Happily, we took the right instead of the wrong turn. We abandoned monopoly. We crushed slavery and the slave trade by an act as heroic as that ever practised by any nation, and at a heavy pecuniary sacrifice made at a time when we were a small people drowned in debt. Out of these two apparent sacrifices grew an Empire and an Imperial trade such as the world had never seen. To smirch our honour and stain our trust now in order to benefit certain British trades, or, if you will, to give us more, better, and cheaper margarine, would be a great crime, and also a great folly. Empires, like men, live by an invisible flame within them, and that flame is the sense of honour, righteousness, and truth. That is highfalutin, not business? Not a bit of it. It is sound sense—the merest and clearest prudence.

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W. Speaight & Sons, Ltd., Printers, 98-99, Fetter Lane, London, E.C. 4.